

Shaheed Titumir

The Muslim Hero of Bengal

(Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan)

Introduction

Titu Mir was acclaimed as a martyr by his supporters and disciples for his heroic struggle against the agents of oppression under the British rule in Bengal. His brave encounters against the new feudal order of *zaminders* created by the British under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, his fearless confrontation with the local British administration, his victorious fight against the armed *Barkandazes* and the police, and, finally, his courageous stand against a large contingent of British cavalry and infantry forcing him to take an unfaltering position with a tiny group of loyal followers in front of his *basher kella* or bamboo stockade turned him into a legendary hero. His image was deified as *Shaheed*; and his descendants and followers gained the popular epithet of *Ghazi* or victor as a prefix to their names. His heroism was commemorated in an epic versified narrative, composed in the style of the then popular *punthiliterature*, entitled *Narkelbarir Janga*, i.e. the battle of Narkelbari. The saga of his valour was sung by many boatmen in the folksongs of *Sujan Ghazir Gaan*.

To quote a passage from earlier writings concerning him:

“Championing the mute sufferings of the teeming millions of peasantry against the increasingly provocative aggression of the landlords, Titu Mir at first, brought the issue in good faith before the Court of British Justice. Failing to get redress therein, he turned with indomitable courage, unswerving honesty, goodwill and wounded pride to the forum of ‘public opinion’ of a subjugated people, resulting in a type of ‘agitation politics’. This marked the beginning of the ‘Bengalee peasant movement’, and targeted him as a rebellious character, in the eye of the foreign occupation power. Eventually it resulted in his violent death, in the hands of the British troopers.”

Looking back into the annals of history, we see that six hundred years prior to the advent of the East India Company Bengal was a *Shariah*-based Muslim Sultanate. It had then been decreed that the proprietary holding right of agricultural land lay with the actual cultivators. According to the *Shariah* or the Laws of Islam, Allah is the real owner of the land and the actual tillers or the cultivators were the legal owners and utilitarian proprietors of the cultivated and arable lands. The government or *sarkar*, as the guardian and manager of the people, is authorised by the *Sharia* to estimate and collect legally valid revenues for the land at the rate of one-twentieth, one-tenth, one-fifth or one-fourth of the produce depending on the categories of the irrigational, rain-fed or contractual lands. No additional taxation was usually allowed on cultivated land. The government had to make direct arrangement for the estimation of the crops and collection of the revenues on the basis of crop volume, for which the Muslim rulers set up a network of local revenue offices or *Khas Mahaals* covering the whole country. Detailed rent-roll including the farmer's names, the measurement of the land-holding and estimates of the revenues were maintained in the registers of the *Khas Mahaals*. The farmers were directly connected with government and no middlemen were allowed. This revenue system had been introduced by the Muslim rulers throughout Bengal during their rule from the 13th to the mid-18th centuries. This was completely overturned by the East India Company's Permanent Settlement

Act of 1793 reducing the peasantry to near serfdom and enhancing the position of the newly created landlords or zaminders to a European style of proprietorship.

The Transition and Economic Upheaval in Rural Bengal in Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries

Before the advent of East India Company rule, the peasantry of Bengal were said to have “wielded the plough in one land and spindle on the other,” which led Bengal to the height of prosperity due to rich agricultural output and huge production of hand-woven cloths of innumerable varieties. Having occupied *Subah* (i.e. the province) *Bangala*, which included all of Bengal (pre-1906), Bihar and Orissa, following the Battles of Plassey and Buxar in 1757 and 1764, and having the grant of the *Dewani of Subah Bangala* with the legal status of Revenue Collector to the British East India Company by the Emperor of Delhi in 1765, the Company took five major steps, all leading to surreptitious subjugation of the people and “unlawful” exploitation of the land.

The *first* step was disbandment of the Nawabi armed forces, making a large number of local people unemployed. The *second* step was the drainage of wealth from Bengal to England by loot and vandalism to balance the Company’s budget. The *third* step was aimed at wiping out the weaving industry of Bengal, including the world-famous Muslin, turning the whole country into a market for Manchester textiles. The *fourth* step was confiscation of the innumerable rent-free land by the Muslim rulers for running numerous religious, educational and social welfare institutions and establishments were also affected. The *fifth* step was the feudalisation of the agricultural land and confiscation of peasants’ rights on land by means of the Permanent Settlement, and by introducing exploitative forced cultivation of indigo to facilitate capital investment of English financiers. All these were done by enactment of new laws in substitution of *Shariah* laws. The independent judiciary, headed by the *Qadi al-Qudat*, the Chief Justice and a network of the *Qadis* (the Judges), posted under the Chief Justice, monitored the smooth operation of *Shariah* laws. Soon after winning political power, the East India Company raised a new slogan that said: “the land belongs to God, the kingdom of Delhi *Badshah* (the emperor) and the *Sarkar* (government) to the Company *Bahadur*.” Titu Mir’s active campaign in the districts of 24 Parganas, Barasat, Nadia and elsewhere of what is today West Bengal, was an agitational strife of the oppressed peasantry against the *zaminders* and indigo planters.

At about the same time an Islamic reform movement – Fara’idi or Faraizi movement – was started by Haji Shariatullah in the greater district of Faridpur in 1818. It spread widely in Dhaka, Comilla, Barisal and other neighbouring districts. His son and successor Muhsinuddin Ahmad alias Dudu Miah gave it the shape of an agitational movement of the peasantry in a mortal confrontation with the *zaminders* and indigo planters. In its religious fervour, Titu Mir’s peasants’ movement was identical with that of the *Fara’idi* movement. By the middle of 1830 the local British administrators started to take the side of the landlords and planters.

The renowned English scholar and civil servant W. W. Hunter calculated the condition of the Muslim community of rural Bengal of the time with penetrating acumen, and frankly expressed the view that the intervening seventy-five years of British rule (1765-1840), which covered five generations, had completely pauperised the Muslim population. He contended that seventy-five years before, it was almost impossible to find any poor family amongst the Muslims of Bengal, and now it was difficult to find any well-to-do family amongst them. He said the Muslims accused the English on several grounds for their abject misfortune, among which the confiscation of rent-free land grants and the abolition of the network of the posts of *Qadis* were reckoned to be the two most devastating causes.

Indeed, rampant large scale resumption proceedings and confiscation of rent-free lands by the East India Company government seriously affected the subsistence level of the Muslim intellectuals and the educated class, because these were the sole source of financial support for the Muslim educational institutions. These also provided the livelihood of numerous noble families and were financial sources of many charitable social welfare foundations and the remuneration of the retired pensioners. It also ruined the higher (*Madrassah*) education system and completely destroyed the widely scattered elementary education (*maktab*) system of rural Bengal. The cost of education, including a stipend to scholars, used to be borne from rent-free land grants that amounted to a sizeable portion of the total cultivable lands. Under one pretext or another, the Company government confiscated a great proportion of these lands.

Similarly, the *Qadi* played a pivotal role in the Muslim society and the state. He was the authorised functionary of State to uphold the rules of the Shariah; the preserver of the bounds of sovereignty; maintainer of the natural rights of the people; defender of religious sanctity; of human rights as understood in those days. *Qadi* was the guardian of the widows, orphans, the destitute, paupers and the helpless; the sanctioning authority of marriage and divorce, and, above all, he was the judge of the Civil Court (*Adalat*). In addition, he was the administrator of *Zakat* and *Ushar*, the compulsory Islamic poor tax or relief, realised from the wealthy people, which was collected and maintained by the State and distributed amongst the poor, needy, destitute, indebted, travelers, etc. This huge non-government relief fund was under the charge of the *Qadi*. With the abolition of the post of this critical civil administration post by the East India Company, the government also dispensed with the collection and disbursement of *Zakat* and *Ushar*. The absence of the *Qadis* had created chaotic conditions in the vast rural areas. Besides, the creation of feudal landlords by the Permanent Settlement had overturned the existing order of rural life.

The cumulative effect of systematic deprivation of the Muslim community from all avenues of livelihood thoroughly pauperised them. Hunter observes that the lack of educational facilities and social neglect during seventy five years of British rule had steeped the Muslim community into a state of utter poverty and ignorance. They became like a herd of sheep without a shepherd, one in ten even not

knowing the *kalimah*, the article of faith.

In addition to the landlords and planters, there was another class of exploiters, the *gomastas*, the local agents of the English men who carried on the unusual private business of the East India Company's servants. The gomastas went through the length and breadth of the country, took hold of the rural markets by virtue of the power of their white masters. Entering the market, they would make a survey of the commodities and would select the profitable ones, fix a low stipulated wholesale price, purchase them and sell out to the buyers at a monopolistic high price. In this way, they completely broke the prosperous economy of rural Bengal.

Recording the adverse effect of the Company rule around the 1830s and '40s, an English officer sullenly remarked that they brought about a "loathsome revolution" resembling the Robespearean era of France.

Life Sketch

Titu Mir was the nickname of Sayyid Nisar Ali. He was born in village Hayadpur in the district of 24 Parganas, close to the city of Kolkata, in 1781 or 1782. He died in 1831 fighting the British army at Narkelbaria, about six kilo meters away from his village. A recent newspaper report under the caption "*Will the name of Titu Mir be effaced?*" states:

On account of negligence, lack of affection and heedlessness of Bangalee pride in the Bamboo Stockade, the memory of Titu Mir is gradually fading away from the two villages of Hadarpur and Narkelbaria in West Bengal. The two villages of Badurhia block of northern 24 Parganas have earned a proud place in history for the first martyr of the Peasant Rebellion, Shaheed Titu Mir. The descendants earn their livelihood by helping people in religious performances. Madat Ali informed the reporter that at the insistence of the Government of West Bengal a stone inscription was ceremonially installed at Haydarpur on 31st August 2000. Another descendant of Titu Mir, Sayyid Tarab Ali (80) said, at Narkelbaria, where Titu Mir fought against the British at his Bamboo Stockade sacrificing his life as the leader of the Peasant Rebellion, a "Shaheed Bedi" was established a few years back at the initiative of the Government of West Bengal, but now it is lying in a neglected condition. The inhabitants of the area are poverty-stricken, and thy appeal through the press to the governments of India and Bangladesh to come forward to keep the martyr's memory alive.

It is evident that he was born into a respectable *Sayyid* family and that good arrangements were made by his parents for his elementary education. Abdul Ghafur Siddiqi, his local biographer, states that he completed his formal education at the age of 18, and that he acquired a good physical training at the local *Akhrha*, the traditional gymnasium. These abounded in rural Bengal in those days where youths were trained in wrestling, swordsmanship, use of different kinds of armaments, horse riding, swimming, and various games and sports.

There is no account of the duration of his learning or about his educational proficiency. The fact that he excelled in the art of wrestling is testified by his adoption of it as a professional career. To keep the peasantry under their control the *zaminders* and indigo planters raised corps of *lathials* under their regular employment. There is evidence in the periodical police report that fighting for lands have become rampant in those days, and that the new breed of landlords sheltered thieves and robbers and took shares from their plunders. Titu Mir, well known for his martial skills, was once hired as a *lathial* by a Hindu *zaminder* of Nadia. Here, he was implicated in an affray and was imprisoned. In the long report by an English officer, Colvin, to justify the military expedition against Titu Mir and his followers soon after he was ruthlessly killed by heavy cannonade in November 1831, it is stated that he was at one time “a turbulent and disorderly character, having been apprehended on several occasions on serious charges, for some of which he was confined and punished. Colvin also states that “some seven or eight years ago an accident brought him to the notice of a member of the Royal Family of Delhi whom he attended on a pilgrimage to Mecca; after his return, he remained for about a year ‘without exciting remark’ and then commenced his career as a religious teacher and reformer.”

Soon after the battle of Narkelbaria, Colvin was commissioned by the British government to investigate and report about the rebellion of Titu Mir. He misread the patriotism of Titu Mir and submitted a lengthy report, vilifying him and suspecting his rightful struggle against the encroachment of the *zaminders* on the lawful rights of the peasantry as rebellion against the government.

Writing about four decades later, Hunter says that on release from prison, which Colvin calculated occurred about the year 1822 or 1823; Titu Mir came in contact with the princely member of Delhi royalty, Mirza Ghulam Nabi, whom he attended on a pilgrimage to Mecca. There he met Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed of Rai Barielly and accepted his discipleship. According to another government source, he appears to have returned to Bengal in 1827 and settled down at his village Haydarpur.

Colvin further observes that Titu Mir gradually collected a body of 300/400 followers who distinguished themselves from the bulk of Mohemmedan inhabitants of the country by costume and appearance, and by their refusal to join in social functions and ceremonies with any other than their own rank and file, as well as by the peculiarity and superior strictness of their doctrines. According to the same source, his influence had extended to the tract of the country running across *Jamuna* and *Issamati* rivers of 24 *Parganas*, spearheading into the jurisdiction of the district of Nadia some 18 to 20 miles in breadth. The Imperial Gazetter of India considers the influence of Titu Mir over the peasantry of Nadia as great. In view of the above statements, the extent of Titu Mir’s influence appears to have been palpably underestimated by the English officials.

Nature of His Religious Reform

We have no definite evidence as to the personal qualification or delegated authority of Titu Mir for preaching puritan doctrines of Islam, though his local biographer Siddiqi claims on hearsay that he was invested with this authority by Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed of Rai Bareilly. However, Biharilal Sarkar made a thorough investigation about it and says that one Mawlavi Muhammad Husayn of Pabna district was appointed *Khalifah* by Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed, and not Titu Mir. The former's proclamation included: (i) "the attributes of God must not be applied to human beings, and (ii) no rite or ceremony, excepting those prescribed by the Quran and *Sunnah*, the Prophetic tradition, be observed." It is amplified in the *sanad* that "none of the angel, spirit, demon, pir, disciple, teacher, student, saint or prophet has the power to bestow good or inflict injury on anybody. Therefore, none of them should be worshipped or propitiated...". Biharilal observes that Titu Mir returned home with similar ideas. According to current tradition, his meeting with the Sayyid at Makkah was arranged by Mawlavi Muhammad Husayn, who was accompanying the Sayyid as a leading disciple. Dr. A. R. Mallick's description of Titu Mir's preachings tally with the dictates of the *sanad*.

As a local peculiarity, Titu Mir directed his followers to grow beards and to wear the loin cloth, the *dhuti* (the usual Hindu dress of the time, which the Muslims also used to put on) plainly, without crossing one end between the legs, since such cross-tying obstructed the process of *salat* or Muslim prayer. Both these practices were also introduced by the Fara'idi leader Dudu Miyan, probably by borrowing from him. Titu Mir is said to have asked his followers to keep away from the unreformed Muslims. These isolationist instructions must have created a division within local Muslim society, which is known to the present day as the Wahhabi-Sunni divide, the advantage of which was grabbed by the new Hindu *zaminders*, as a way of reducing or nipping in the bud the sense of growing unity amongst their tenants.

Social Disputes and Intervention of Zaminders

On his return from Makkah in 1827, Titu Mir settled down in his village Haydarpur and devoted himself to the propagation of puritan reform in Islam. According to one government source, for this commendable task he also received a stipend from his royal patron. His reforms were undoubtedly derived from the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah* or so-called Indian Wahhabism, which was propagated by him and his followers with a Bengali tinge and social behaviour. The movement silently spread far and wide.

Dr. Mallick observes that the peculiarities of Titu Mir's followers soon involved them in differences of opinion and disputes with the followers of traditional Islamic customs. But such disputes in West Bengal did not go beyond an exchange of words, since the people in that region were less aggressive than their compatriots in East Bengal. Eventually, however, some cases of complaints were brought to the notice of the new zaminders who were already watching with suspicion the

activities of this new group. Dr. Mallick observes that:

The zaminders exerted all their powers to check the growth of an association which treats them with disrespect and exhibits a power of combination which might hereafter seriously affect their interest.

Titu Mir's source of inspiration was religious, viz. Islamic Puritanism, which was derived from the Islamic revivalist movement of Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed of Rai Bareilly. Like his preceptor, he sought to revive the pristine doctrines of Islam, the Unitarianism or tawhid as preached by Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), and to eradicate innovative customs, superstitions, lingering pre-Islamic idolatrous usages and foreign influences which had encrusted the fundamentals of Islam. This revivalism clashed with the local customary practices of Islam carried out by the traditional society, as happens even today in different parts of Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Titu Mir's Struggle to Safeguard the Rights of the Peasantry

The English government records make it sufficiently evident that Titu Mir had come from a respectable family. IN the court proceedings of 1832, his name has been recorded with the title of "Syed," that is, a purported descendant of the holy Prophet, which carried, in those days, the highest status in Muslim society. In the Colvin report, it is stated that he was of "noble family above the class of the ordinary villagers." His Muslim biographer Abdul Ghafur Siddiqi speaks highly of his Islamic family tradition and his Hindu biographer, Biharilal Sarkar, also treats him and his family with high respect.

Nevertheless, having come out of the general run of the people, he cherished the hopes and fears and also the aspirations of the common people, the rural peasantry, who were in those days sharply distinguished as "Ryots" meaning "subjects" as against the upper class of the decaying Mughal gentry, who were going down under the increasing pressure of the English rulers. Rising from an obscure background, first as a religious reformer and then as a rural leader, Titu Mir's propagation of a reformed faith, and his endeavour to improve the social and spiritual life of his followers drew him nearer to the economic woes and sufferings of the down-trodden peasantry. These people were reduced to abject poverty under the trade monopolies of the ruling East India Company's English servants, as well as by the enserfment of the farmers of the land by the Permanent Settlement, and the forced cultivation of indigo introduced by the Company government.

The Permanent Settlement Act cast down and ousted the former landlords, who were commissioned revenue collectors under the Mughal revenue system and were replaced by a new class of parvenus who purchased the land with commercial motives and who, by virtue of the new regulating act became owners of the land like the Western type of landed barons or feudal lords. The new system drove the peasantry to near serfdom.

Titu Mir believed in the right of every farmer to enjoy the fruits of his labour in

consonance with the Quranic ruling that “a human being has no right except on the fruits of his or her strivings” (*Surah al-Najm*). The holy Prophet of Islam said: “Whoever reclaims a land, it belongs to him.” On this basis, they asserted the rule of the *Shariah* that the cultivable land belonged to the farmers, and raised the slogan: “Land belongs to the holder of the plough.” (*langal jar jami taar*) The reform movement launched by Titu Mir in 1827 generated a strong socio-economic ferment by 1831 which directly clashed with the interest of the new upper class *zaminders* and indigo planters. Yet, Colvin reports in November 1831, “I cannot find that any acts of violence towards others are justly chargeable against Titu Mir’s followers before the commencement of the recent disturbances.”

Biharilal candidly points out that the Company rule had not yet taken firm root in rural Bengal. The process of systematic disarmament was yet to come. The extent of the power of the *zaminders*, who maintained considerable number of *lathials* for controlling the tenants, was great. Besides, the government was reluctant to interfere with them. Consequently, the power of the landlords could scarcely be challenged by the tenants; rather the *zaminders* treated the peasantry as their preserve.

It so happened that by the middle of 1830 some of the conservative opponents of Titu Mir’s radical reforms lodged a complaint with the *zaminders* against him and his followers as disruptionists, seeking their help to restrain him. The *zaminders* were all Hindu parvenus whose activities were centered in the city of Kolkata and who had acquired their estates only recently by the highest bidding. Without a local affiliation, these men were suspicious and afraid of Titu Mir’s leadership and popularity amongst the peasantry and were closely watching his activities. Being apprehensive of the wide support of the peasantry under him, they took the complaint with grave concern. A good number of *zaminders* and *gomastas* from far-flung areas combined together and took swift action to stop him and his followers.

The action of the *zaminders* brought Titu Mir into direct collision with them. His slogan of “Land belongs to the wielder of the plough” awakened the dampened spirit of self-respect of a recently subjugated and forcibly suppressed people. Out of the tussle between the *zaminders* and Titu Mir the fateful struggle of peasantry with feudal lords commenced in full swing. The mischievous tentacles of English capitalism showed up for the first time in rural Bengal.

Beginning of the Struggle

According to Colvin, Ram Narayan, *zaminder* of Taragonia was the first to move in taking cognizance of the complaint lodged by the religious opponents of Titu Mir. He was followed by Gaur Prasad Chowdhury, *zaminders* of Nagarpur, Krishna Dev Ray, *zaminder* of Punra and the Agent of the female *zaminder* of Koorgatchy; and prompted by a desire to take advantage of the dispute between two Muslim parties of *Ryots* (peasants), they imposed fines on some of the followers of Titu Mir residing within their estates. They also subjected them to maltreatment.

Quoting from a government document, A. R. Mallick states that one form of maltreatment was a 'beard tax' imposed by Krishna Dev on the followers of Titu Mir at an enormous rate of two and half rupees per head. Abdul Ghafur Siddiqi has listed five kinds of illegal taxes including beard tax imposed by the zaminders. According to the government document, the beard tax was realised successfully at Punra but met with resistance at Sarfarazpur, where Titu Mir's following was strong. They challenged the right of the *zaminder* to levy such an illegal tax, which was also disparaging to the religious feelings of the Muslims. Krishna Dev quickly retaliated by subjecting the recalcitrant to physical torture as well as by seizing their property on the false plea of non-payment of regular taxes. The government record of Bengal Judicial Consultation, dated 15th April 1832, accuses them of carrying out these measures "by their fraudulent and oppressive use of the power of summary arrest for arrears of rent authorised under the provision of the regulation 7 to 1799."

Titu Mir's legal challenge to the *zaminders* regarding their right to impose "beard tax" and inflict physical torture on the tenants in the court of the Joint Magistrate of Barasat on the 7th August 1830 brought only dismay and disappointment to him and his followers. The European magistrate did not think it advisable to interfere with the activities of the *zaminders* in consideration of the land settlement with them. The case was dismissed with an ambiguous judgment.

Titu Mir's biographer Siddiqi states that at Sarfarazpur Titu Mir repaired an old dilapidated mosque and established his missionary centre there for propagation of his new doctrines. His followers were in a strong position there to challenge the right of the *zaminder* to impose an illegal beard tax. The other side alleged that some servants of *Zaminder* Krishna Dev, who were sent there for collecting this tax, were beaten and detained. However, the abrupt dismissal of the "beard tax" case by the Joint Magistrate implied that the right of the zaminders to impose such a dishonourable tax remained unchallenged in the eyes of the law, rather it was tacitly approved. This deepened the conflict between Titu Mir and the landlords.

Confrontation with the Zaminders

The Sarfarazpur incident made Dev furious and about the middle of 1831 he proceeded to the village with a big group of men, sacked the village, burnt the mosque and looted houses. On the complaint of the local people, a Hindu Darogah, the officer-in-charge of the nearby *thana*, came to investigate and reported that the followers of Titu Mir themselves burnt the mosque to implicate the *zaminder*, who happened to be visiting the place on his usual errands. The *Darogah* also served a warrant of arrest against the leading Muslims of the locality. But when the accused were tried in the court, the charges of the police could not be proved and the suit was dismissed.

The Jemadar-in-charge of the Police outmost, who is a Muslim, commenced the inquiry and finding the case far too serious and beyond his jurisdiction, appealed to the higher authorities to be replaced by the experienced *Darogah* (Sub-

inspector of Police), Ram Ram Chakravarty of the Bashirhat Police Station to investigate the case. Colvin observes that, after 18 days the zaminder preferred a counter charge of accusing the villagers of assaulting and maltreating three of his servants and of burning their own mosque for the purpose of setting up a case against him. "This accusation was however suspicious as having been preferred after so long an interval was at once taken up and acted upon by the Darogah," Colvin says regrettably. In this complaint, nearly all those villagers being weavers who were a party to the earlier complaint against the zaminder or witness to the case "were accused". *Darogah* Ram Ram Chakravarty seized some of the witness in favour of the weavers and sent them up as defendants. Intimidated by this unholy tactic of the *Darogah*, the rest of the witnesses of Titu Mir's side absconded or concealed them. In his final report the *Darogah* excused himself for his inability to take the deposition of the villagers due to their non-attendance; he made no observation about the nature and origin of the complaints or about the mode of investigation. In short, says Colvin, he drew his report "entirely so as to favour the zaminder."

Colvin says that "the needlessly belaboured report" of the Darogah, magnifying the counter-charges of the zaminder "roused doubts of fairness" in the mind of the Magistrate. He summoned a number of fresh witnesses whose evidence was directly opposed to the police report. The Magistrate dismissed the case on 2nd September 1831 on the plea of insufficient evidence, but imposed a fine of Rs. 500 on each party to keep the peace. On 25th September the party of Titu Mir took out a copy of the judgment of the Joint Magistrate and proceeded to Kolkata under Ghulam Masoom preferring an appeal to the Commissioner's Court, who was, however, at the time "absent in the Circuit," and realising the futility of pursuing the case, they came back disappointed.

Their repeated failure to secure justice through peaceful legal means threw them into a state of frustration and despondency that brought their conflict with the zaminders to a climax. Titu Mir and his party brooded over the matter for about three weeks before they decided to pursue a direct approach which was the only honourable course open to them. Ghulam Masoom had returned from Kolkata towards the end of September 1831 and on 23rd October Titu Mir and his followers began to assemble at Narkelbaria on the pretext of celebrating a feast in honour of several holy men. They were welcomed by one of the earliest and wealthy disciples of Titu Mir, Muizuddin Biswas. He sheltered them in and around his residence. Colvin says that, alarmed at the assemblage of Muslim peasantry, Krishna Dev "got together the means to resist them." But they remained there in festivities from 23rd December to 6th November 1831 before they fell upon Punra, the village of Krishna Dev. Meanwhile, Titu Mir's followers came up spontaneously at the spot of Muizuddin Biswas's residence and built upon the famous "Bamboo Stockade", a kind of fortress to protect them from the aggression of the zaminders. On the other hand, Biharilal Sarkar says that Krishna Dev and the other zaminders joined forces and made elaborate preparations to confront Titu Mir. Kaliprasanna, the *zaminder* of Gobardanga, even appealed to his friend Latu Babu of Kolkata for help, who sent 200 "Habshi" fighters for assistance.

Colvin says that in the morning of 6th November 1831, the party of Titu Mir proceeded to the village of Punra. They quietly arrived at the market-place unopposed, slaughtered a cow, scattered the blood over the walls of a Hindu temple and hung up the four quartets of the animal before the temple. Biharilal Sarkar says that it was the day of *Baroari* puja, which is unconfirmed being supported by neither indulge in loot or plunder nor did they do any harm to human life beyond beating two persons, who may have opposed and confronted them. Apparently, they did it in retaliation to the burning of their mosque by the zaminder.

Battle of Lawghata

On 7th November 1831 the day following the Punra incident, Titu Mir's party proceeded to Lawghata or Lawghati in the neighbouring district of Nadia. Here they sought to slaughter cows for their meals, which however, was prohibited by Hindu zaminders to demonstrate their newly acquired powers. According to Colvin, it prompted resistance by a group of zaminder's men headed by two Brahmins. The resistance led to tussles and skirmishes and eventually a serious affray ensued. Biharilal says that it led to full-scale fighting between the joint forces of Kaliprasanna's Habshi fighters and those of Krishna Dev's fighting men on the one side, and Titu Mir's followers on the other. Krishna Dev was not, however, present at the spot, his people were led by his younger brother Devanath Ray. The European Manager of Mullahati Indigo Factory Mr. Davis also joined hands with the zaminders at the head of his corps of *lathials*.

Fierce fighting raged through the greater part of the day. In the thick of the skirmishes Devanath was killed while fighting on horse-back. The party of Davis made a separate attack on Titu Mir's faction, but was instantly beaten back. At the end, Titu Mir's followers came out victorious.

Colvin says that the Battle of Lawghata completely broke the powers of the zaminders and indigo planters and "at once created a general terror" which left the followers of Titu Mir "masters of that part of the country." The victory of Titu Mir over the oppressive view feudal lords was hailed by the peasantry. It captured the imagination of the masses who commemorated it by the folk-song of *Sujan Ghazir Gaan*, the goodly victor's song. Titu Mir and his followers were exalted by the masses of the people with the dignity of *Ghazi*, which devolved as a proudly acquired victorious traditional title with their names and with those with their descendents.

Later Skirmishes

Titu Mir's arch-enemy Krishna Dev was probably terror-stricken by the innovative confrontational strategy of his adversary, and the quick and wide mobilization of popular support. Being pitted against the peasant movement of Titu Mir, the zaminders of the fair-flung areas began to send intelligence reports to the higher

government authorities at Kolkata, depicting Titu Mir as a rebellious character. Moreover, Mr. Davis of Mullahati indigo factory, Mr. Piron of Barguriah indigo factory and Mr. Storm of another indigo factory appealed to the government for protection. As a result, the commissioner of the circuit Mr. Barwell called for an explanation on 13th November 1831, from the Officiating Joint Magistrate of Barasat, Mr. Alexander, as to why on receiving intimation of what had occurred, he had not "given instant intelligence to this office?" Barwell visited the police station in person to ascertain the facts of the report forwarded by Alexander, Piron and the agent of Storm as well as police reports of Kalinga and Bashirhat Thanas. He found no cause for any serious apprehension and suspected that their activities were evidently "for the real purpose of plunder." According to Colvin, "from the 8th the 15th of November 1831, Titu Mir's party gradually increased in numbers"; then making various adverse comments, he asserts that "their proceedings at the same time, it should be mentioned, were not marked by any acts of gross cruelty." Barwell, however, ordered the Joint Magistrate Alexander on 13th November 1831 to take immediate steps to check the outrages and to keep the government informed about the situation.

Nevertheless, a critical scrutiny of all available evidence pointed to the fact that after taking retaliation for burning the mosque at Sarfarazpur with a counter-attack at Krishna Dev Roy's village Punra, and defiling the Hindu Mandir, and thereafter breaking the power of the zaminders at Lawghata, Titu Mir's party committed no outrages whatsoever. It was not seen as a Hindu-Muslim riot, nor was it regarded as communal violence. Such nefarious ideas had not yet cropped up in the Bengalee social arena. The age-old religious harmony, mutual respect and tolerance, had prevailed. However, the administrative step taken by Alexander to implement the orders from above, brought the conflict to a head.

On 14th November 1831, Joint Magistrate of Basarat Mr Alexander took a large party and made an expedition to Narkelbaria to apprehend Titu Mir. The expedition proved a failure. In a short engagement, the police party was beaten back. Alexander had proceeded with several groups of police and armed guards consisting of 5 Jamadars, 3 Havildars and 73 sepoy. The Trial Papers record that the police and civilian forces assembled at Bashirhat Thana counted more than 125 men.

When the police force came within sight of Titu Mir's party, the officer ordered blank fire to frighten them. No sooner they did so than Titu Mir's party headed by Ghulam Masoom fell upon them so rapidly that the police found no time to refill their match-locks. In the melee 10 sepoy, 3 Barkandazes and 1 Jamadar were killed. One Havildar was seriously wounded and was left for dead. Several Barkandazes and the *Darogah* of Bashirhat Ram Ram Chakravarti were carried into the Bamboo Stockade. Alexander escaped with great difficulty.

Long before this incident, a recluse Fakir called Miskin Shah had appeared at Titu Mir's camp, and in the wake of his victory over the police force, it was widely publicized that the Fakir had eaten up the bullets. The propaganda, though false, further attracted the simple credulous people to join hands with Titu Mir's party.

The confrontation with the police party by Titu Mir's band of men, their frontal attack on the government forces, resulting in numerous deaths and casualties on the government side, removed all doubt from the mind of the Joint Magistrate Alexander regarding the rebellious character of Titu Mir, as it was being reported by the zaminders. He hurried to Kolkata to enlighten the Government about the gravity of the situation, and to impress upon it the necessity of firm action. Consequently, a Regiment of Native infantry was ordered to proceed to the troubled spot.

Meanwhile, Krishna Dev Ray who was absent at Lawghata, had gone to the neighbouring town and approached the Magistrate of Krishnagar, who got together a good number of men and proceeded to Narkelbaria on 17th November 1831, accompanied by a group of Europeans mounted on an elephant. Getting intelligence of the Krishnagar expedition, Titu Mir chalked out a plan to harass them. At one point when the party was embarking on a country boat to cross a river, Titu Mir's men fell upon them and so quickly dragged the boat ashore that in frightful panic they ran pell-mall in all directions. The Englishmen fled back. Krishna Dev Roy was saved by the magnanimity of an old Muslim servant of his, who had joined Titu Mir's party, and a prominent Hindu, Monohar Roy, who had also joined hands with Titu Mir against the oppressive zaminders. The expedition was thus stalemated. W.W. Hunter says that Titu Mir's party on this occasion cut down those who were slowest in retreat. But Biharilal Sarkar's detailed description and other circumstantial data refute this contention.

Battle of Narkelbaria

The third and final military expedition, which was ordered from Kolkata on 16th November 1831, arrived at Narkelbaria on 19th November, commanded by Major Scott-Harding and accompanied by Joint Magistrate Alexander. It carried two field guns and included some Horse Artillery. The expeditionary party encamped within a short distance of Titu Mir's Bamboo Stockade, popularly known as *Basher Killa*, and fired a blank shots from the cannon. It was at once rumoured that the Miskin Fakeer had eaten up the cannon balls.

Another report says that Mr. Alexander proceeded in advance on 18th November with the troops of the bodyguard commanded by Captain Sutherland and the troops of Horse Artillery to reconnoitre the position of the insurgents, and arrived at the Stockade of Narkelbaria. The rest of the cavalry arrived soon after and "a little skirmishing took place during which one artillery-man and two horses were shot." The Trial Papers state that "while engaged in making observations, the party of Horse were hooted at and abused by the insurgents, who far from showing any signs of intimidation commenced skirmishing with the troopers. A European artillery man was then killed by a musket shot that came from the insurgents, and some other minor casualties occurred."

On 19th November 1831, the field guns were brought up in the morning and preparations were made for an attack, Alexander said, "marauders were still

assembled shouting defiance.” After a round or two of grape-shot “they retired to a kind of stockade, when the infantry advanced and commenced firing, which in about an hour finished the business.”

In another version, the Trial Papers state that the insurgents were drawn up in front of a village, “armed and prepared to fight”. Their arms were, however, long bamboo sticks and a few matchlocks, which they may have captured from the defeated police force. It says, when the troopers advanced, they “received the detachment with loud yells.” “On the first round being fired [they] set up a general call, still maintaining their ground, nor it was until after the troops had repeated their fire that they dispersed throwing down their arms and retreating into the stockade.”

In still another version, Biharilal Sarkar says that Titu Mir and his followers offered no resistance, but eagerly waited for the Miskin Fakeer to eat up the bullets and cannon balls. Unfortunately, however, the Fakeer left them in the lurch to be consumed by the fire-balls of the enemy. The action began with heavy cannonade and merciless shooting. After the first round of firing, a small party came out of the stockade and was shot down one by one. The rest stood where they were in stunned amazement only to be done to death by the troopers. Some that had managed to climb up the trees were brought down by shooting. In his letter to Commissioner Barwell, dated 19th November 1831, Alexander stated that the number of dead was about 50 and nearly 30 wounded, with 250 taken prisoner, the number of which was enhanced on 21st November to 350. Titu Mir himself was amongst those 50 who were killed during the operation. The bodies were collected and burnt, lest the body of Titu Mir be carried away and buried as that of a martyr. Thus ended the short but illustrious and memorable career of Titu Mir that left for posterity the legend of his *Basher Killa*, with which he defied the might of British imperialism.

Conclusion

As a spiritual disciple of Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed and follower of *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah*, Titu Mir vigorously carried on his puritan socio-religious reform movement aiming at the revival of the pristine Islamic spirit in the moribund Muslim society of his time. As a socio-political revolutionary, he disseminated the radical ideas of rehabilitating the primary dignity of human labour with the slogan “land belongs to the wielder of the plough” (*langal jaar jamin taar*) and by his declaration of the equality and brotherhood of mankind. His noblest contribution to life was his great idea of welding together spiritual dignity of the man of God with a humanitarian economics on the basis of the Quranic dictum, “Nothing is due to man except the fruit of his strivings” (Surah al-Najm). It holds that in this earthly life “human rights emanate from human labour” and in the life after death “his spiritual reward or punishment accrues from the good or bad intention and motive behind his labour.” Thus, Titu Mir intended to convey to the humanity the grand idea that labour is the basis of human fortune and that the fruit of human labour is his due.

He declared that the *zaminders* were the oppressors and extortionists of the peasantry and that they had no legitimate right to the production of the land. His call for the equality and brotherhood of mankind generated a new spirit of unity and solidarity of the peasantry, which posed a serious threat to the selfish interests of the zaminders, indigo planters and the British imperialists. They had all united their efforts to crush him in 1831. Titu Mir's peasant movement was the fore-runner of agitational politics in Bengal, the impact of which still lingers in the psychological make-up of the Bengalee mind. His ideal as focused on 'labour' reflected the early Medinan society of Prophet of Islam and anticipated in Karl Marx's concept of labour as the basis of wealth.